

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon

Optimism

By Rabbi Deborah Bodin Cohen

Last fall, on the Eve on Sukkot, my friend Bob opened the door of his Brooklyn brownstone and found a briefcase sitting at the base of the stoop. Bob looked right and left and saw nobody in sight, and so lifted the briefcase, full of curiosity. When a few minutes past and the owner did not return, Bob opened the briefcase and this is what he found:

- A cell phone
- A wallet
- A siddur or prayerbook
- A pair of Tefillin, the straps and boxes that traditional Jews wear when they pray
- A laptop
- A French passport
- And, a return ticket from JFK to Paris in 10 days time

So, basically everything that you would not leave someplace unattended. Especially not in front of a random brownstone in Brooklyn. I should mention – Bob is Jewish but his mezuzah is not visible from the street. So, if you think this might be a story about mezuzah, it is not. I should also mention that Bob just happens to be the lead investigative reporter for New York Magazine. Mysteries entice him and he is good at solving them.

Back to the story. So, the possibilities raced through Bob's mind. What had happened to the owner?

- Had he been mugged?
- Kidnapped?
- Or, was there a simpler, less sinister explanation. Had he:
- Jumped in a cab and in his haste left the briefcase
- Greeted a long lost friend or relative and, in the emotion of the moment simply forgotten his briefcase

Bob was certain of one thing – the owner must be frantically looking for his items.

Bob does live far from 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights – the international headquarters of Lubavitch Hasidic Judaism – the former home of Rebbe Menechem Schneerson. A quick google search confirmed what Bob suspected – the briefcase's owner was a Hasidic Jew from the outskirts of Paris. But, Sukkot had begun. And the first two days of Sukkot has the same restrictions as Shabbat in the Orthodox community – no electricity, no phones, no computers, not writing. Nobody in Crown Heights would be answering their phones for two days. 770 Eastern Parkway was officially closed for business.

Bob thought about going to the police – but knew the briefcase would be treated as a low priority or, worse, get lost in some warehouse on Staten Island. He called the French consulate but they seemed unsure what to do with it. So, he decided to investigate himself. He went to Borough Park and went sukkah to sukkah, explaining his predicament to many, many people and passing out his business card.

A few rather tipsy yeshiva students took up his cause and escorted him deeper into community. He was invited to parties and family get-togethers, a few people thought that they might have seen his French Jew, but no avail – Bob could not find the man. He had though shared the story and his card with dozens of people – surely somebody would get the message to the French man.

Finally the first two days of the holiday were about to end. Bob decided if nobody claimed the briefcase that night, he would go to the police. Low and behold, at about 9:15 pm, there was a knock at the door. There were two men on Bob's stoop– the French yeshiva bocher and his American friend. The French man was in good spirits and good health. Bob was stunned to learn that he had not been worried about his belongings at all.

Bob, and even the French man's friend, were left scratching their heads at the explanation. The French man had been walking down Bob's Brooklyn street when the sun began to fall. The man knew, that by strict interpretations of Jewish law, it was not permissible to carry his

briefcase on the holiday. Seeing no other option, he intentionally left it at the base of Bob's stoop.

He felt certain that whoever found it would take good care of it and, after the holiday, he would go back and retrieve it. He had not seen the mezuzah, he knew nothing about Bob. He was an optimist and believed in the kindness of others.

Bob resisted the urge to lecture the man about the risk of leaving an important briefcase on a random Brooklyn stoop. Who simply drops their most important identification on the sidewalk and expects it to be there when they return? Doesn't everybody know it will get stolen? Was he naïve or just a knucklehead?

But, the fact is the briefcase had not been stolen. In fact, the Frenchman's assumption was right. An honest person had found the briefcase, took good care of it and gladly gave it back when he returned. Out of all the brownstones in Brooklyn, the man randomly chose one not only owned by a Jew, but one owned by an investigative reporter. Who was the knucklehead? The optimist or the pessimist? Who learned his lesson –the French Jew or Bob?

It is actually not surprising that our French friend was an optimist about human nature. The Rebbe, Menechem Schneerson, was reportedly one of the most supreme optimists. In fact, he was optimistic down to the details of the language that he used. He insisted on language to

express positive thinking, not negativism. Consider the following, Rebbe Menechem Schneerson:

- Never used the traditional word for a hospital – beit cholim – or house of the sick. Rather, he called it Beit Refuah – a house of healing.
- He didn't use the word "deadline" but the word "due date." Deadline mentions death whereas due date connotes birth.

Now, I am certainly not a follower of Rebbe Menechem Schneerson. But, many of his lessons hold great truth. The power of words to connote optimism or pessimism is one of these lessons. And, it is a particularly important lesson for Yom Kippur.

Here we stand on Yom Kippur morning, on the cusp of a new Jewish year, looking forward with perhaps some trepidation. What does the New Year have in store for us? Will it be a time of joy or a period of difficulty? Will our past hinder or enable us to move forward? Will our future give us the perspective to better understand, and accept, the past?

In the past 4 months, our Jewish community, our world has lost two extraordinary men. Both Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres, I would believe, were tremendous role models in the power of optimism. Not the naïve type of optimism that led our French man to leave his belongings on a Brooklyn street, but a deep seated, pragmatic optimism that allowed Elie Wiesel and Shimon

Peres to move beyond their past to envision a better future, that made each of them worthy of a Nobel peace prize.

Elie Wiesel witnessed unimaginable horrors during his childhood spent in concentration camps and went on to champion the causes of other oppressed people.

Shimon Peres was a protégé of David Ben Gurion, he fought in Israel's War of Independence and had a role in every Israeli war after that. He understood risk to the depth of his soul. Yet, both Wiesel and Peres both strove for reconciliation, for peace, for a stronger future for the next generation. Wiesel knew butchery and evil, Peres knew the horrible toll of war – and neither was held back.

Shimon Peres once said: "Optimists and pessimists die the same way. They just live differently. I prefer to live as an optimist." From Peres we learn, being an optimist is in our own power. We can make the choice of optimism over pessimism. We can look at difficult situations, what appears to be an unsolvable problem – and strive to solve it, or at least live with it in a positive way.

Peres once said, "If a problem has no solution, it may not be a problem, but a fact - not to be solved, but to be coped with over time."

This is an important lesson to learn – an Optimist does not need to solve everything. When we face a difficult situation, sometimes, there is no solution. We just need to accept it. And, by accepting it, we learn to live with it. Learning to live with it is optimism. We no longer allow the difficulty to drag us down – rather move forward, taking it with us, as part of us.

Elie Wiesel once told the New York Time: “I am pessimistic because I don’t trust history. But at the same time, I am optimistic. Out of despair, one creates. What else can one do? There is no good reason to go on living, but you must go on living. There is no good reason to bring a child into this world but you must have children to give the world a new innocence, a new reason to aspire towards innocence. As Camus said, in a world of unhappiness, you must create happiness.”

Wiesel, like Peres, puts the power of optimism fully in our control. When we face a difficult situation, we must create a plausible, positive outcome. Our ability to create something beautiful out of desperation – that is our human gift – that is our optimism.

Wiesel’s and Peres’ optimism is rooted deeply in our tradition. In the words of Torah itself. Like Rebbe Menechem Schneerson taught, word choice can connote so much. In our yearly Torah cycle, we are approaching the end of the Five Books of Moses. The final book – Deuteronomy – is Moses’ parting words to the Israelites. Camped on the East bank of the Jordan, the Israelites are focused forward, to the time that they will cross over the river and

enter to the Promised Land. But, looking forward, the Israelites could certainly have their fair share of trepidation. Will tyrants like Pharoah greet them? Will they walk into a trap of slavery rather than freedom? Will they find themselves wandering once again, overwhelmed and held back by their own fear?

40 years before, the Israelites spies had entered the land and came back with pessimistic reports – that the land was teeming with giants. How can this younger generation of Israelites be optimists instead? Moses begins his speech with a “code word” for optimism. Moses uses the verb *VeHaya* or “*And it will be.*” It is the “to be” verb in the future tense, rather than the more typical past tense construction, *VaYehi*. According to tradition, “*VeHaya*” is a code word for joyful expectation where *VaYehi* is a code word for trepidation.

Incidentally, or maybe not so incidentally, God’s name *yud-hay-vav-hay* is also a form of this verb. We are talking about holy sacredness, an elevated state of being, when we are optimists.

Rav Kook explains the significance of the difference between *VeHaya* and *VaYehi*. A person who takes a *VaYehi* approach looks back at past pain and projects it into the future. A *VaYehi* approach would mean looking at pain of slavery and assuming it will repeat itself in the Promised Land.

But, the Torah says *VeHaya* not *VaYehi*. Projecting the pain of the past into our future is not the approach. In our approach, the *VeHaya* way of approaching the world, the Israelites look forward to the freedom and sanctity of life in the Promised Land. Then, they project it backward, thus recognizing the holy sparks that have existed in their journey so far and seeing this holiness only multiplying into the future.

As we stand here on Yom Kippur, I encourage you to take a *VeHaya* approach to the future. Look forward and see the potential that the New Year holds. Anticipate happiness, success and sacredness ahead. And, when you reflect on the past, do so with the same joyful expectation.

May we live the next year with purpose. As Elie Wiesel once said, “Our obligation is to give meaning to life and in doing so to overcome the passive, indifferent life.” May Elie Wiesel rest in peace, his memory forever a blessing.

May we live the next with year as pragmatic optimists. As Shimon Peres once said, “For me, dreaming is simply being pragmatic. “ May Shimon Peres rest in peace, his memory forever a blessing.

And a final word of optimism – please, please do not leave a briefcase full of important documents on the stoop of a Brooklyn brownstone. 2.5 million people live in Brooklyn – and my friend Bob is just one of them.